

Just a Minute..

Romans 12:21 "Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good."

Racism possesses both the ability to divide friends and the inability to unite enemies. People's response to racism seems to amplify this characteristic and quickly divides societies into an "US" and a "THEM". Sadly, if you say what others do not want to hear, or if you do not say what others want to hear, you become one of "THEM". We see this in the United States now, and it breaks my heart.



I am a South African who has followed the events in Charlottesville with great sadness. At first, it seemed like Charlottesville represented a small portion of a glorious nation and sanity would eventually prevail once the tears and the dust settled. I believed that normality would return quickly, and watched how the majority condemned the violence and expressed anguish at the death of a young lady.

But then social media caught alight. The indiscriminate platform of undiscerning comments once again proved how easy it is to create enemies, to spread division, to slander individuals and to condemn groups without looking someone in the eye and facing the consequences of harsh words. We all tend to judge ourselves by our motives and others by their actions, and in recent days, everybody with an opinion felt they had the right to do to others what they condemned in others. Sadly, Christians and non-Christians responded in a similar manner, and suddenly everybody became an expert on a subject that has more to do with fear and suspicion than with the colour of people's skin. Anger replaced anguish, and within days, anybody who had a different opinion became 'enemy number one'.

Are the events in Charlottesville any business of a white South African living on the other side of the globe? Probably not. But South Africans of all races have learnt some valuable lessons that might assist observers of racism anywhere in the world. The prejudice of a minority always has the potential to destroy the relationships of the majority. And this is as equal a danger as the prejudice itself. The events in Charlottesville – and the response that followed – run the risk of dividing friends, family and countrymen who had nothing to do with the incident but who feel a need to respond aggressively.

Richard Wurmbrand once told a story of a man who got lost in a forest, unable to find his way out. He suddenly found another man walking about aimlessly and immediately rushed over to ask for directions. "Can you please show me the way to get out of the forest?" the man requested. "Sorry, my friend, I am also lost and have been lost in this forest for two months now," the stranger replied. The man was disappointed. "Then you have nothing to offer me, so I will keep on looking by myself," he said. "Not so fast," the stranger replied. "I might not be able to show you the way out of the forest, but I can show you a number of paths that are not worth pursuing."

South Africa might not have invented racism nor have we conquered it, but we have learnt some painful lessons from paths that are not worth pursuing. A nation that endearingly became known as the "Rainbow Nation" after the first democratic elections in 1994 still battles with suspicion and fear. We have matured, albeit at a painfully slow pace, but we still are a nation of wonderful people trying to escape the 'forest of racism'. We might not have all the answers, but we certainly have enough experience in broken relationships to warn today's America about what paths not to pursue when it comes to responding to racism.

Do not allow your response to destroy your NATION

The cure to racism lies in repentance from the radical minority as well as in reconciliation from the moderate majority. "Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Never allow the evil of a small minority (and the response to it) conquer the good of the majority.

Do not allow your response to destroy your RELATIONSHIPS

A post on Facebook declared: "If you support them (the "white supremacists") then I don't support you, UNFRIEND me." This was from one Christian to all her friends. And while the response is understandable in the face of racism, it

is sad how there is no desire to sit and discuss differences face-to-face. Many racists are indoctrinated by upbringings and the attitudes of elders, and sitting down with someone with whom we disagree could play a role in radical change if we are willing to listen before judging. America is too great a nation to be side-tracked by broken relationships.

Do not allow your response to destroy your DEMOCRACY

Democracy is built on the right of all people to have convictions that differ from one another – it is not rooted in the principle that everybody agrees with one another. The fact that my convictions offend you doesn't necessarily mean that you are right, and vice versa. Without question, some things like racism and the destruction of another's dignity is deeply un-Christian and has no place in a 'Christian' society, but there are a lot of other grey areas where people differ widely in opinion. Judging people for thinking differently, even if it offends, goes against the principles of a glorious democracy.

Do not allow your response to destroy your WITNESS

Christians are not called to be RIGHT, they are called to be KIND. A sad reality is that some responses to racism destroy the Christian witness. When Christians respond with the same anger as non-Christians, and when it becomes easier to condemn than to convict, Christian witness is ruined. Sadly, social media often provides a platform for people to 'condemn nicely' using Christian jargon with the un-Christian attitude of self-righteousness.

Do not allow your response to destroy your VIRTUES

Racism feeds on anger, fear, suspicion and a victim mentality. If we respond with an attitude of aggressive self-righteousness, any racial event will spiral into worsening hatred. It might be good to read 1 Corinthians 13 (v 4-8) again: *"Love is patient and kind, love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs, love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. Love is eternal"* (GNB).

A Christian response to racism

Bill Hybels advised the following at the 2017 Global Leadership Summit:

- 1. Set the example of how to differ with others without demonising them.*
- 2. Model how to have spirited conversations without 'drawing blood'.*
- 3. Set the example of being courteous in word and deed.*
- 4. Apologise immediately when wrong instead of denying or doubling down.*
- 5. Form opinions carefully and stay open-minded if better information comes along.*

Richard Rohr says the following:

"Let me describe God's universal love as best I can: love is recognising oneself in the other by realising they are not other! We are all in this together."